

Year One Peer-Evaluation Report

**Western Washington University
Bellingham, WA**

May 2011

***A confidential report of findings prepared for the Northwest Commission on Colleges
and Universities***

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Roster of Evaluators

Chair: Dr. Michael Bowers, Executive Vice President & Provost
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Dr. Stephen Adkison, Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs
Eastern Oregon University

Ms. Megan Carlson, Academic Project Specialist
University of Alaska Anchorage

Introduction

In March 2010, member institutions of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities were notified that the changes to the accreditation standards and cycle had been accepted. At that time, Western Washington University (Western) was informed that their seven-year cycle would begin with a Year One Report in Spring 2011. This report was submitted by the institution in March 2011, and reviewed by a panel of three evaluators in March and April of that year.

Assessment of the Institution's Self-Evaluation Report and Support Materials

The institution's self-evaluation report is helpful in describing the regions and populations served by Western, as well as highlighting focal areas within the mission, including being committed to remaining a highly ranked public master's granting institution in the Northwest, and to community engagement and service.

The report describes the fiscal restraints under which the university must operate, including state support dropping from over 60% of the total budget to just over 30% with more decreases planned. Among other updates since the last report, the Year One self-evaluation describes efforts to incorporate inclusive and participatory processes in addressing necessary budget reductions.

Together with care taken to align strategic planning and accreditation activities, these inclusive efforts to "assess the strengths of [each unit's] contributions to the university mission"¹ will be helpful as the university seeks to align resources and capacity with the mission in future stages of this accreditation process.

Western's report and strategic planning efforts have been developed by the University Planning and Resource Council (UPRC), following a "bottom-up" design including input at the department, unit, and campus levels. The new strategic plan, created by the UPRC, was approved by the Faculty Senate and the Board of Trustees.

Eligibility Requirements Two and Three

The institution clearly demonstrates that its Board of Trustees has approved the mission, core themes, and strategic plan, following thorough vetting and contributions from Western's internal and external communities as required by Eligibility Requirement Three (Mission and Core Themes).

Less clear is the institution's authority to operate as a higher education institution as required by Eligibility Requirement Two (Authority). *Understanding the request to include an executive summary for ERs 2 and 3 with this report was a late addition to the guidelines, the institution is encouraged to follow the guidelines released in March 2011 to ensure its next report addresses the ERs as noted in the guidelines.* (Eligibility Requirement 2)

Concern One: *Understanding the request to include an executive summary for ERs 2 and 3 with this report was a late addition to the guidelines, the institution is encouraged to follow the guidelines released in March 2011 to ensure its next report addresses the ERs as noted in the guidelines.* (Eligibility Requirement 2)

¹ WWU Year One Report, p. 5

Section One: Standard One Findings

Standard 1.A.1 Mission

The institution has presented its mission through a mission statement, vision, and statement of institutional strategic goals. As stated above, the mission and strategic plan were updated with participation from Western's internal and external communities and approved by the Board in 2010. The areas of the mission focused on in the self-evaluation include addressing community needs; expanding access and opportunities; promoting life-long learning; strengthening communities beyond the campus through scholarship, creativity, and research; and serving as a model for institutional effectiveness, innovation, diversity, and sustainability. The essential elements of the mission are translated into Core Themes, discussed under item 1.B below.

Standard 1.A.2 Mission Fulfillment

Mission fulfillment is defined through two components. First, the institution will have fulfilled its mission if it "continues to be recognized as a premier, undergraduate-centered university that fosters engagement, citizenship, and collaboration among a diverse student body."² This evaluation is based on both qualitative and quantitative indicators, such as National Survey for Student Engagement results, retention rates, and access to arts events. Additionally, mission fulfillment is dependent on improvement in two key areas: documented annual hours of community service and engagement by university employees and students, and a statistically significant increase in four-year graduation rates. Where qualitative indicators are used, the institution has provided rubrics for evaluating the degree of achievement.

The institution is commended for establishing two facets of mission fulfillment, reflecting a commitment to maintaining mission-critical levels of achievement and to advancing two areas of primary importance to the mission beyond their current levels. However, the articulation of mission fulfillment is somewhat unclear.

As the institution begins its revisions for the next report, it should clarify the relationship between the core theme indicators and mission fulfillment. In particular, the connection between the indicators which inform mission fulfillment and the rest of the Core Theme indicators is unclear. (Standard 1.A.2, 1.B.2)

Standard 1.B Core Themes

The essential elements of the mission are translated into Core Themes focusing on (1) expanding student access, (2) fostering student success, and (3) strengthening communities beyond the campus.

The rationale for these core themes as the primary components of the institution's mission is well developed within the discussion of each Core Theme. As an example, the first core theme narrative defines Western's broad-reaching definition of access ("from admission to graduation"³) and addresses the challenges faced by the institution and the work undertaken to support this Core Theme.

² WWU Year One Report, p. 7

³ WWU Year One Report, p. 10

Standard 1.B.2 Core Theme Objectives and Indicators

The three essential components of the mission make up the Core Themes. These Core Themes are further developed into 9 objectives, with approximately 33 indicators⁴ used to measure these objectives. Each objective is fleshed out to identify its purpose and any areas for specific attention (such as the types of underrepresented student groups).

Rationale is provided for each Core Theme indicator, to better describe how each is meaningful and assessable. As an example, the indicators in Objective 2b (*Students are adequately prepared to succeed in their chosen field*) are justified as assessable because they “can be collected, quantified, and compared over time.” They also serve to combine student self-perceptions, employment evidence, and employer reports of student accomplishment.

Taken as a whole, the objectives are appropriate to the Core Themes as described. The indicators represent a mix of both quantitative (e.g. student community service hours) and qualitative (e.g. Student Voices survey of student employment experiences) measures. *The institution is to be commended on its usage of numerous output- and impact-oriented indicators, as these will provide more direct evidence of the affect its programs and services have had on its students and communities.*

While the suite of indicators is generally quite appropriate to the number of Core Themes and objectives, it appears that the indicators currently only include student learning outcomes as they relate to the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) “value added” score comparing student growth between freshman and senior years in a number of critical areas. *As program assessment is systematized and developed, the institution is encouraged to incorporate more evidence of student learning outcomes data throughout the educational experience and within academic programs into the evaluation of both Core Themes and Mission Fulfillment.* (Standard 1.B.2)

⁴ *Since some indicators are used in more than one objective, and many are components of a single measure (such as the National Survey for Student Engagement), the actual number of indicators to track may be slightly smaller.*

Summary

Overall, Western Washington University has placed itself in a strong position to succeed in this seven-year process evaluating its mission fulfillment and directing resources at its critical priorities. *The committee commends the institution for the efforts it has undertaken to embrace recommendations to increase transparency and faculty participation in resource decisions, and for its efforts to engage both internal and external communities in strategic planning.* These changes will support the ease and effectiveness of the next steps in the seven-year accreditation reporting process, and help to focusing resources and capacities in challenging financial times.

Commendation One: The committee commends the institution for the efforts it has undertaken to embrace recommendations to increase transparency and faculty participation in resource decisions, and for its efforts to engage both internal and external communities in strategic planning.

Commendation Two: The institution is commended for establishing two facets of mission fulfillment, reflecting a commitment to maintaining mission-critical levels of achievement and to advancing two areas of primary importance to the mission beyond their current levels.

Commendation Three: The institution is to be commended on its usage of numerous output- and impact-oriented indicators, as these will provide more direct evidence of the affect its programs and services have had on its students and communities.

Recommendation One: As the institution begins its revisions for the next report, it should clarify the relationship between the core theme indicators and mission fulfillment. In particular, the connection between the indicators tha inform mission fulfillment and the rest of the Core Theme indicators is unclear. (Standard 1.A.2, 1.B.2)

Recommendation Two: As program assessment capacity is systematized and developed, the institution is encouraged to incorporate more evidence of student learning outcomes data throughout the educational experience and within academic programs into the evaluation of both Core Themes and Mission Fulfillment. (Standard 1.B.2)